

## Article

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## **Developing method to meet the needs of the research**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents a reflective account of how and why the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were used in doctoral research to explore the phenomenon of competence for social work practice. Research that is hermeneutic in nature situates power and influence with the researcher and therefore careful selection of method and a reflexive approach are essential. For an insider-practitioner researcher, who aims to consider perspectives of lived experience, the hearing of and theorisation from participants' voice is paramount. Therefore when designing research consideration is required to ensure alignment and coherence between the research questions, methodology and method to be able to hear voice, to work toward generating credible insights and to draw conclusions that the professional community will find value in. This article explores how IPA was adapted to enable engagement with the depth and breadth of co-constructed qualitative data. This adaptation included drawing upon the phenomenological principles of hermeneutic circling and bracketing, resulting in the development of an individualised three stage data analysis model. This model is illustrated by way of a flow chart and is presented to encourage the novice researcher to have confidence to personalise method to meet the needs of their own research project.

**Key Words:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, voice, hermeneutic circling, bracketing and practitioner research.

## **1. Introduction**

As a novice researcher, I initially set out to look for a recipe of how to analyse data and thought that a book would provide a step by step guide to answer my research questions. However, my journey became one of an 'iterative decision-making process' shaped by a circular moving backward and forward between methodology 'objectives, research questions, and design' (Carter & Little, 2007:1323). Just because I considered my research to be phenomenological in nature did not mean that I had a blueprint or fixed set of procedures at my disposal but it did mean that I had an understanding of what could be known and how I could come to know it (ontology and epistemology) (Mason, 2002). Therefore, the selection and design of method was influenced by my methodological stance and by the questions I set out to answer. My research aim was to understand perspectives about a phenomenon. Yet, the constructivist ontology and interpretive epistemology of phenomenology situates power with the researcher in terms of voice because they decide what and how to research, whose voice is heard, what questions to ask, how the voice is interpreted, and in writing the researcher also has editorial rights over whose voice and which parts of interview data are included (Alcoff, 2009; Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). My research questions were designed to understand the perspectives of others yet interpretive research methods had the potential to situate a great deal of power with me as the researcher and in recognising this I felt the need to maintain focus on the voice of the participants within the methods employed.

As a practitioner researcher undertaking credible and ethical research was most important as I continued to work in the research setting alongside the research participants after completing the doctoral journey. Therefore, I aimed to work towards giving the best possible representation of participants' voice whilst acknowledging my own constructions and interpretations and this included careful consideration of how I was hearing voice within the data generation process and all stages thereafter. Drawing upon the work of Jonathan A.

Smith (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2008), and maintaining a focus on the research questions and methodology, I began to explore a range of techniques to assist me to engage with the voice of the participants. This resulted in the development of a three-stage data analysis method, which drew upon hermeneutic circling alongside Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which enabled me to engage with the depth and breadth of voice within data. This paper presents a descriptive account of my bespoke method to encourage other novice researchers to go confidently, be intuitive and experimental in their approach to qualitative data analysis. It is my intention that students of research may gain confidence to personalise method to meet the needs of their own research projects.

## **2. Phenomenological Research**

My doctoral research used phenomenological methodology to understand how practice educators construct the competence phenomenon. Practice educators are social work practitioners that supervise, teach and assess social work students on practice learning placements and make a recommendation to the awarding university whether a student is ‘fit to practise at the point of qualification’ (SWRB, 2010:1). Although this responsibility situates them as important in the gatekeeping for the social work profession, how they recognise competence had previously been under researched in the UK. I engaged with 17 practice educator participants who collectively had 252 years of social work experience and had worked with 520 students and therefore were able to ‘illuminate the phenomenon of’ competence for social work practice (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007:616). My research aimed to interpret perspectives of the competence phenomenon from participants’ lived experience and in the semi structured interviews I asked questions, such as:

- What do you understand by the term ‘fit in practice’?

- How do you recognise competence in final year social work students?
- What do you think makes a student competent to practice social work?
- Do you find it easy to decide if a student is competent to practice social work / fit in practice?
- What do you take into consideration when making your decision?
- What sources of evidence do you use to inform your assessment?

As phenomenology is interested in thinking, rather than behaviour, phenomenological analysis generates representation of perspectives rather than a description of what participants actually do in practice. I considered that the interpreting and theorising element of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to be more relevant to my research questions than traditional descriptive phenomenology (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011) as giving thought to the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon and exploring meaning moves the research further than mere description (Dahlberg, 2006). IPA was relevant to my research as I was concerned with individual perspectives and was not seeking to produce an objective statement about what competence is (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interpreting and theorising by way of IPA aims to ‘understand what the particular respondent thinks or believes about the topic under discussion’ (Smith, 1996:263). Therefore in my research ‘it is the perception of [competence] which is significant rather than [competence] per se’ (Smith, 1996:269-270).

My phenomenological research used semi structured interviews to gain understanding of perceptions, insights (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010), experiences and understanding (Cousin, 2009) of the competence phenomenon as constructed by the practice educator participants. According to Smith and Osborn (2008) the semi structured interview is likely to be the best way to capture data for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis because they enable the use of both tour and probe questions to generate rich data and capture perspectives

and experiences in detail (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). I prefer the term ‘generation’ of data rather than ‘collection’ or ‘capturing’ as it more closely represents the co-construction process that occurred during the interviews. As the interviewer I did not ‘excavate’ the data rather my interpretation of what was said or implied during the interview influenced the co-construction process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) and the way that I was able to adapt questions and use participants’ own words to encourage them to elaborate resulted in ‘a seemingly natural conversation with the interviewee’ (Melia, 1997:34). I found the fluidity of the semi structured interview enabled the participants to introduce topics and issues that I had not previously expected and rich data about competence for social work practice was generated.

The ‘scholarly approach’ of phenomenology is used to ‘interpret meaning from everyday lived experiences’ (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011:375) and although ‘the interpretive account should illuminate the world of the participants, articulate taken-for-granted meanings, practices, habits, skills, and concerns’ these are all subject to recall, current position, and the ability to find the right words to describe experience (Benner, 1994:xviii). The interpretivist position therefore does not make claims of provable truths as interpretation is subjective and to use the words of Grix (2004) is likely to be ‘messy’. This messiness arises from what we know and how we come to know it and involves complex inter-subjectivity and multiple layers of interpretation. During the interviews the participants and I co-constructed data through this interpretive process and Sarantakos (1998) suggests it is the job of the phenomenologist to ‘unravel’ the picture (Sarantakos, 1998:56). My approach to unravelling the picture (or making sense of the data) was therefore complex as there were multiple layers of interpretation compounded by my own knowledge and understandings as a practitioner researcher. My positionality is both that of an insider and outsider; like the interview participants I am a social worker and qualified practice educator yet as an academic

I no longer practice social work. I am therefore on a sliding continuum moving between insider and outsider (Hockey, 1993) in a 'third space' or 'space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009:60) which allows one to be both an insider and outsider at the same time. Hockey (1993) points out that insiders are familiar and understand language and behaviour of the participants yet cautions that insiders may not be objective, they may take things for granted, may be too familiar and therefore overlook key things.

Therefore during analysis and theorisation I had to be aware that the data had been co-constructed through multiple layers of interpretation all of which I, as a practitioner researcher, had influenced and had to some degree insider understanding. Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest there is no one way to analyse data within phenomenology and like other qualitative research methodologies the researcher has to individualise their approach. King and Horrocks (2010) advise the procedures and techniques ought to meet the needs of the research project and although Smith offers a four stage process of IPA he too advocates for the researcher to adapt it to their 'own particular way of working' because 'qualitative analysis is ... a personal process' (Smith et al., 1999:220).

'IPA has been developed specifically within psychology' and is increasingly being employed within health and social science research (Rodriguez & Smith, 2014:479). For example Beestin, Hugh-Jones and Gough (2014) 'followed the procedures for IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (1999) and Smith and Osborn (2003)' in their research of the impact of maternal postnatal depression on men (Beestin, Hugh-Jones, & Gough, 2014:721). IPA was used a 'guiding framework' to research being a non-drinking student (Conroy & de Visser, 2014:540) and used to understand the experience of self-disgust in females with depressive symptoms (Powell, Overton, & Simpson, 2014). Each of these research projects appear to have followed a similar process of coding each participant's transcript before considering connections and themes across participants' accounts. My adapted approach also

closely matches the same initial coding process as described by Smith and engaged in a 'cyclical' process of looking in and between participants accounts (Smith et al., 1999:224 - 225). However like Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) I too found value in using the principles of hermeneutic circling because it offered me an additional way of engaging with participants accounts and what follows is a descriptive and reflective account of my personalised method to engage with voice in the generated data. I present a three stage process with each stage illustrated by way of a flowchart and all stages are illustrated together at the end of the document.

### **3. A Personalized Model for Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

During the first stage of data analysis I needed to engage with the text for meaning which Mason (2002) calls interpretive reading because you construct 'a version of what you think the data means or represents, or what you think you can infer' (Mason, 2002:149). To do this I listened to the interview sound files and read each transcript a number of times and repeatedly asked myself 'what is this an example of' which helped me to focus on interpreting the meaning. The phrase 'what is this an example of' was inspired by the work of Ely (1991) who uses the term 'think units' (Ely, 1991:145). As Ely advised, I interrogated the data to identify the key messages within the text and this helped me to attach a code (name, term or phrase) to represent my understanding. Using a hard copy of the transcript of the interview I highlighted sections of text and in the margin wrote a code to reflect my interpretation and this technique of engaging with text and asking myself 'what is this an example of' inductively generated many codes. The codes were my interpretation of what I understood the practice educator participant had experienced or was inferring. The codes identified my interpretation of the meaning within the text.

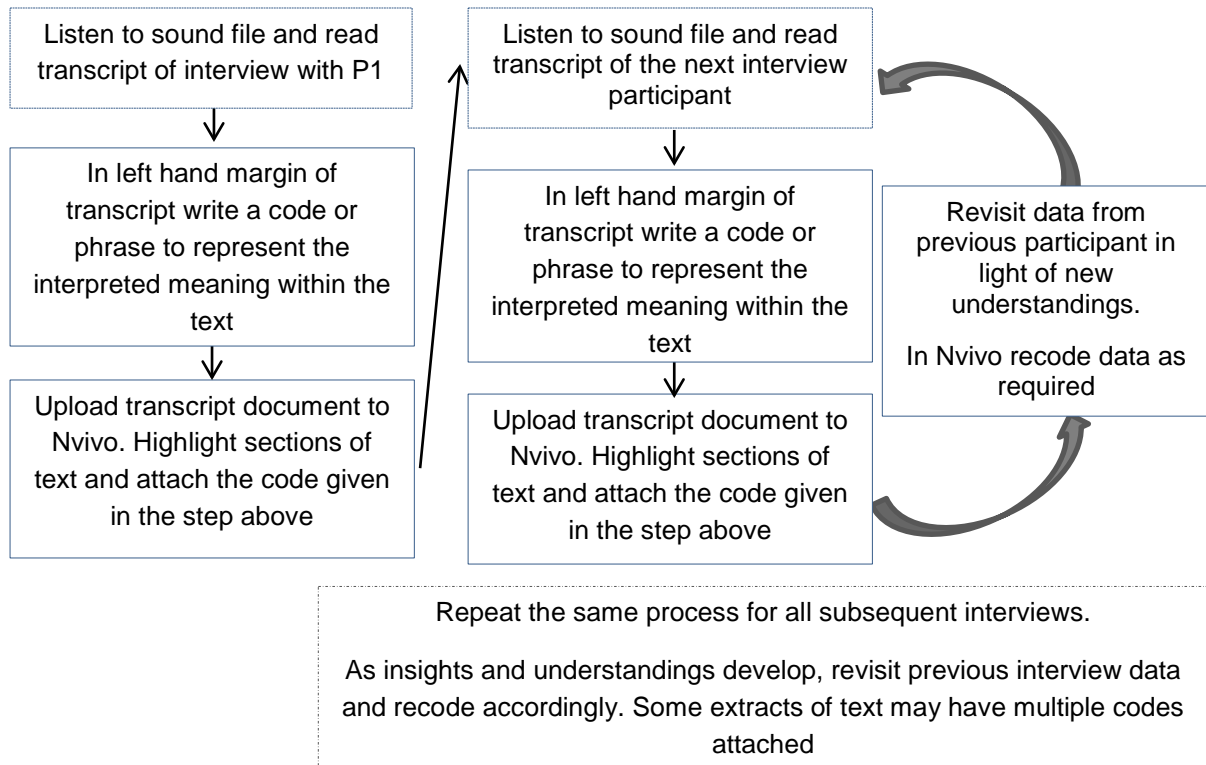


When I had fully coded the first interview I then uploaded an electronic copy of the transcript into the software programme NVivo and highlighted and attached codes exactly as I had done on the hard copy. This coding exercise was undertaken with each subsequent interview text usually before the next interview was conducted which helped to stop me feeling overwhelmed by data, but more importantly, it assisted with the planning for the subsequent interview. I was able to recognise new and unique perspectives and use probe questions more effectively during the interviews. During the coding process I frequently came up with new coding names and when I revisited previously analysed transcripts it was often possible for me to see similar instances that I had previously missed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). An example of this is when I used the coding title ‘practice educator role’ for the first time. On revisiting previous interviews I was able to identify instances where other practice educator participants had also been talking about their role but I had not previously recognised this. I was then able to reconsider the text in the light of my developing interpretations and this frequently resulted in my recoding extracts of data and making links between codes. A second example is when the participant I call Alice discussed how challenging practice learning placements can be for students and how she tries to give students every opportunity to succeed. When the transcript of the interview with the first participant (Hazel) was revisited she too had mentioned giving students the opportunity to succeed:

“Coz I think it’s only fair you should give somebody a really good run and you know a fair chance.” (Hazel)

The technique of revisiting text in light of new and potential insights helped to identify common themes across data. Figure 1 illustrates how the data was continually revisited in light of new understandings and insights. NVivo was a useful data management tool as it enabled me to change codes and add multiple codes to textual extracts easily. As my

thinking and understanding evolved I coded and recoded data many times.



*Figure 1. Stage one: Coding.*

The second stage of my analysis process further developed insights by looking at all data which had the same coding title and is illustrated by way of a flowchart (see figure 2). The NVivo programme has the capacity to organise data by clustering together extracts with similar codes (Edwards & Weller, 2012). I was therefore able to produce a document within NVivo that included all instances coded the same way and this enabled me to interpret and theorise within codes, create sub codes and look for relationships between codes. For example by looking at the 155 extracts of text, which I had coded ‘competence is’ I was able to create eleven subordinate codes to further my understanding of competence:

- Ability to do social work
- Achieving

- Attitude
- Attributes
- Independence
- Knowledge-academic ability
- Learning
- Not the finished article
- Relationships
- Skills
- Values

Breaking data down in this way helped with understanding how practice educators constructed the competence phenomenon. This example illustrate how my coding titles changed and my insights developed through the process of continually revisiting data:

“in some ways, it is a self-preservation skill to be able to just do the job and switch off, isn’t it to some extent” (Alice)

When I asked myself ‘what is this an example of’ I initially thought Alice was describing the nature of social work and I used the code ‘social work is’. Like Alice, Mark also spoke about social work practice and this extract below was also coded ‘social work is’:

“the locality team and transition in particular isn’t the worse bit of social work you’ll do but it is very emotionally intense, practically intense, it’s an awful time, it’s an inevitable time, but an awful time for young people and families” (Mark)

When I looked at the multiple instances within the code ‘social work is’ I realised that the practice educators were not just describing the practical aspects of the job but were also highlighting that social work is a very difficult and demanding profession. The participants articulated their feelings of being overworked, working with very complex and challenging

individuals and were doing this demanding job without adequate supervision. To assist with the interpretation process I recoded all instances where participants described the difficulties of being a social worker to 'social work is difficult'.

On the first reading of this extract from the interview with Carl I thought he was suggesting that the role of the practice educator is to give students real work experiences and I used the code 'practice educator's role':

"they've got all the things that they've always had with partners and children and in laws and parents, yeah, it is tough but, again, it's take the negatives out and say well, this is preparing you for the real work" (Carl)

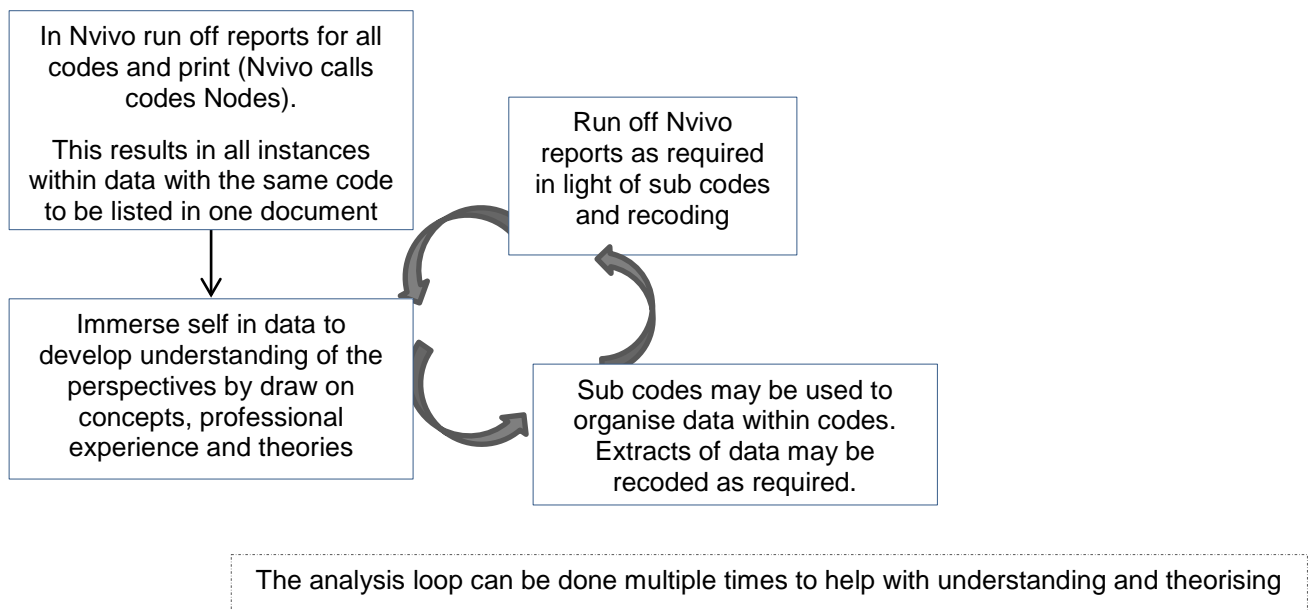
However, by making links and connections to other participants' accounts I began to consider that Carl was looking beyond the practice learning placement into post qualifying practice. During interview Pamela said:

"The newly qualified is supposed to have a protected case load and that does not always happen" (Pamela)

Interrogating data in light of my developing understanding I was able to consider that Carl, Pamela and other participants were perhaps describing the experiences of newly qualified social workers (NQSW). Although I asked questions about final year social work students the practice educators were not isolating the practice learning placement from the experiences students will have when they graduate. Looking across data at those extracts I had coded as 'the practice educators' role', 'service users', 'social work is', 'NQSW' and 'experiences', I was able to draw the inference that practice educators were identifying the need for students to develop resilience for social work practice. In different ways they had all

been drawing upon their lived experience that to do the very difficult job of social work resilience is needed and ‘resilience for social work’ became a new code and a superordinate theme to help me interpret the meaning within the text. It was through the process of immersing myself in interview data and looking across texts that helped me to engage with the voice of participants and explore their perspectives of competence for social work practice.

The first stage of coding individual texts, and the second, which is to look across the range of interview data (which have both been described above), is a commonly practiced data analysis process and it proved to be a useful way for me to engage with data. However, my desire to attend to voice within data encouraged me to further engage with the texts.



*Figure 2. Developing insights.*

#### **4. Hermeneutic Circling**

Attaching initial codes to textual extracts and then looking between and across codes helped me to engage with the breadth and depth of text to begin to understand, interpret

meaning and theorise. However when I broke data down into coded extracts, removed them from their original context and merged parts of text with other similar instances there was a real possibility of misrepresenting the participant. Cutting data up and moving it about can result in the unique perspective within the participant's whole account being lost. Returning to phenomenological literature for guidance I found the principle of hermeneutic circling to be a helpful way to reconceptualise my interpretive approach because 'for the hermeneutic tradition, the hermeneutic circle describes a means for testing our interpretation of a given text' (Warnke, 2011:266). It involves 'continuously moving backwards and forwards between the literature, the research texts and the earlier analysis, moving from parts to whole following a process informed by the hermeneutic circle' (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007:625). Hermeneutic circling moves the researcher between understanding the whole by understanding the parts and vice versa. Cohen et al. (2000) discuss how parts of text need to be understood in relation to the whole and the whole understood in relation to the parts. Similarly Gadamer et al. (2004) claim the 'hermeneutical rule' requires one to 'understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole' (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2004:291).

Hermeneutic circling is an approach or an 'ontological philosophy' but it is not a defined procedure (Debesay, Nåden, & Slettebø, 2008:58). The principle guided me to consider a circular interpretive relationship enabling me to look deep into individual text and also draw my lens out to look at the whole and what I designed is illustrated in figure 3. The initial coding exercises in stage one and stage two of my analysis process fragmented whole interviews and to ensure that I understood the whole I constructed vignettes which I wrote in the first person as though they were practice educator narratives (Ely, 1991). The vignettes were constructed by listening to the interview recording and reading the transcript multiple times to understand each participant's main perspectives. I wrote a few sentences for each

participant to summarise their main themes and I was influenced by the topics the participant had introduced themselves or had repeatedly returned to during the interview. Like the rest of the data analysis process it is important to acknowledge that this activity was subject to my own interpretation and I decided what to include and what phrases to use within these vignettes. Rather than reproduce the participants' whole accounts the construction of vignettes was a 'productive activity' in which I produced my own understanding of meaning using a mix of my words and those of the participants (Gadamer et al., 2004:296). The vignettes are 'multivocal' and the example included here uses speech marks to differentiate those words spoken by the participant and those of myself as narrator summarising the lengthy interview text (Mason, 2002:177).

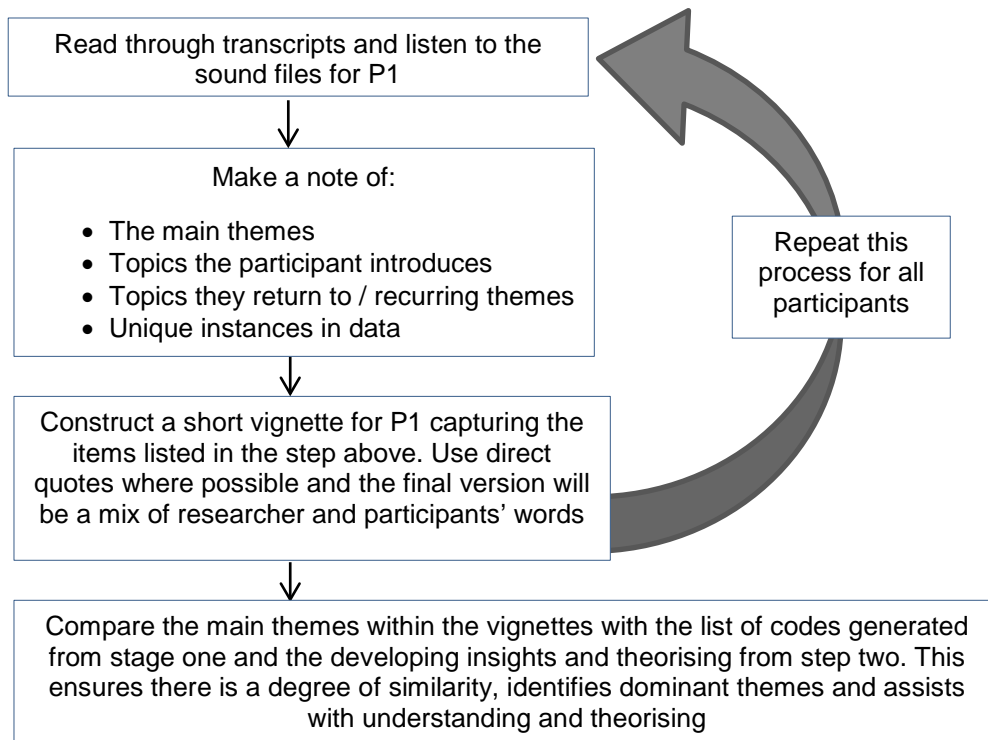
#### ***4.1 Vignette constructed for Liam***

"I try not to flood them as soon as they come in", I gradually give them a few cases and responsibility, and by the end of placement I "take a back seat" because I want the student to "step up". But to do this depends on "how much they want to learn". It is ok for the student not to know everything and make mistakes but they must have "underpinning values" in relation to "what they say and think about service users". Students need to "be able to communicate well in difficult environment[s]" and understand "relevant legislation and relevant procedures". They will not learn everything on placement because "I don't think you can ever know everything" I certainly don't. Working here is difficult "I can barely cope with how different it all is and that's creating massive stress, sickness and all that". Despite that, professionalism is essential and I don't want them to complain and say "I'm exhausted". "I really enjoy [being a practice educator], I've always enjoyed it, something I've always wanted to get into ... but I never realised how difficult it was just balancing that along with your own work commitments and I

think it's, it's a shame that that's not recognised more" by my employer. People should only be a practice educator if they have the time because it is a "massive commitment". (Liam)

The value of writing the vignettes was twofold. First by listening to the entire interview I was able to focus on the whole uncut messages of each participant. It was possible for me to hear their voice and consider what was important to them. The second value of the vignettes is in terms of confirming the original interpretations made during the coding exercise. Although the coding exercise chopped sections of text and moved them into groups the vignettes gave me confidence that the meanings did not appear to have been diluted or lost. The vignettes reinforce the main arguments both across the participants' accounts and also linked to the codes I had previously generated. Warnke (2011) suggests that one gains 'legitimacy for our interpretations when ... we test our understanding of the meaning of each part of a text against our understanding of the meaning of the whole and...' vis versa (Warnke, 2011:266). Although the vignettes included some unique instances, on the whole I was able to see the similarities between the generated codes and the main messages within the vignettes. It is important to acknowledge that I interpreted data in both of these analytical methods so one may expect a degree of similarity. However it is my experience that the vignette construction and principle of hermeneutic circling added value to my research in terms of analysis and theorisation because it enabled me the opportunity to engage with the same text but in a slightly different but complimentary way to hear participants' voice and perspectives about competence for social work.





*Figure 3. Hermeneutic circling*

## **5. Bracketing and Credibility**

The three stage data analysis process I developed afforded me different ways to immerse myself in data to understand practice educator's perspectives of the competence phenomenon. Smith (1999) reminds researchers that there is no prescribed way to do IPA and 'the crucial part of the analysis remains the particular interpretative analysis the investigator brings to the text' (Smith et al., 1999:238). As the sole investigator on my doctoral journey I was aware that my research choices had significant influence on the hearing, interpretation and presentation of voice. Gadamer's (2004) writing on hermeneutics gave me the confidence to interpret my own meaning whilst at the same time to acknowledge the potential limitations of the approach. 'The use of hermeneutic phenomenology enabled the exploration of participants' experiences with further abstraction and interpretation by the researchers based on researchers' theoretical and personal knowledge' (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007:616). As

Gadamer suggests I do not have ‘better understanding’ or ‘superior knowledge’ or ‘superiority of conscious’ rather it is likely that I ‘understand in a different way, *if [I] understand at all*’ (Gadamer et al., 2004:296, italics in original text). I agree with Gadamer’s points and have taken great care to be aware of my own experiences, knowledge and expectations when listening to and interpreting text. I attempted to follow Mitchell’s advice and take off my ‘discursive lens’ (being an insider practitioner researcher as discussed above) and listen to the participant’s voice with ‘soft ears’ (Mitchell, 2009:84-85).

Bracketing is a common phenomenological term and a traditional Husserlian approach requires the researcher to suspend their ‘own preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices so that they do not influence the interpretation’ (Roberts, 2013:215). As well as this Husserlian objective position, there is a contrasting use of bracketing which is more akin to Heidegger’s hermeneutic acceptance which acknowledges subjectivity and one’s influence within the research (Roberts, 2013). It is at this end of the continuum (the acknowledgement of influence) that I engage with bracketing because as a practitioner researcher I had experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon being researched and had many views and opinions which could not be suspended. As an insider researcher it was important for me to acknowledge my identity, position and influence on the research (Creswell, 1998; King & Horrocks, 2010). I therefore use the term bracketing to highlight and draw attention to my influence, attitude and to elucidate taken for granted assumptions (Salter, 2013). Throughout the research process I bracketed by drawing attention to my influence on all aspects of my research rather than considering the research process to be neutral and objective. Bracketing in this manner is reflexive practice which ‘does not limit bias but brings it to the forefront’ (Clancy, 2013:15).

Bracketing has served as a useful tool for reflexivity in my work as it has enabled me to recognize my prejudices, preconceived notions and labels that I attach. I have attempted to

‘locate’ myself as I am ‘inevitably and inextricably implicated in the data generation and interpretation process’ because as a practice educator, social worker and academic I had knowledge, experiences and views about competence for social work at the outset of the research (Mason, 2002:149). Gadamer (2004) calls this ‘fore-meaning’ as individuals do not approach situations as blank pages (Gadamer et al., 2004:270). I attempted throughout the research to acknowledge my fore-meaning to enable me to be more open to hear the life world of the participants from their position rather than imposing my own views and labels as I interpret and draw conclusions. An example of this is my view of competency based education and training (CBET). Working in a school of social work I have been frustrated by the tick box approach to assessing individual competencies and my prejudice was reinforced by the wealth of literature on the limitations of CBET for the assessment of professional practice. I began the semi structured interviews expecting to hear practice educators criticising CBET and by clearly acknowledging what I expected to hear through bracketing I was able to be open to hear an alternative view. The participants appeared to perceive competence for social work practice in a different way than I expected and they were not overtly critical of the competency approach. Attention to my own prejudice and bias enabled me to hear and ‘understand the meaning of another’ and therefore see the text ‘present itself in all its otherness’ (Gadamer et al., 2004:271 & 272). Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) use ‘van Manen’s (1997) term *hermeneutic alertness* to explain how researchers ‘step back to reflect on the meanings of situations rather than accepting their pre-conceptions and interpretations at face value’ thereby recognising the importance of reflexivity (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007:620).

Through having alertness to my potential influence at all stages of the research process and in particular in relation to the analysis, theorisation and the conclusions that I was drawing, I considered it appropriate to return to the practice educators to check out the appropriateness of my developing insights. Cohen et al. (2000) suggest the phrase ‘reducing

bias' covers reliability, accuracy, rigour and goodness (Cohen et al., 2000:85). It has been my intention to acknowledge my bias throughout my research project to produce credible insights because as a social work academic practitioner researcher I have to live with any mistakes that I make and cannot just walk away from the research site nor from the participants (Costley et al., 2010). As I began to share my understandings and insights I needed to do so from a position of confidence in my work knowing that it had been constructed with integrity and that the community find value in my conclusions. Going back to the community of practice educators and inviting them to provide feedback on my developing understandings maintained coherence with my ontological and epistemological positions of 'jointly creating an understanding'; there is no one objective way to construct the phenomenon and I wished to heightened my alertness 'to multiple ways of seeing' (Carter & Little, 2007:1321).

One event that I hosted was for a group of nine practice educators whom I engaged in a card sort activity to rank statements about competence 'into a continuum of significance' (Jahrami, Marnoch, & Gray, 2009:178). The participants' discussions during the sorting process were captured on a voice recorder and were a useful 'spur for deeper and richer analysis' (Bloor, 1997:49; Ellingsen, Størksen, & Stephens, 2010). The event was similar to a focus group and proved to be an important opportunity to review and check my developing understandings to ensure that interpretations were valid and of value to the practice educators themselves. A seminar for practice educators and an international conference provided the opportunity to begin to share my findings and the discussions and feedback gave me further confidence that my interpretation, analysis and theorisation was constructed in a way that the community were able to find value in and identify with. As is common in doctoral research I kept a research diary, engaged in dialogue with a critical friend and worked alongside my supervisory team to ensure that I was reflective, reflexive and working to produce credible research.

## **6. Conclusion**

My research set out to understand more about the competence phenomenon and through semi structured interviews I asked participants to draw upon their lived experiences of working with social work students. Rather than aim to produce an objective statement to describe competence my phenomenological research was more hermeneutic in nature and it was important for me to recognise the multiple layers of interpretation at play. IPA was a useful framework to enable me to begin coding data however my desire to hear voice and at the same time acknowledge the complexities of interpretation led me to develop a more personalised method. By attending to ‘the theoretical and disciplinary bases [of] methodology’ I was able to develop a ‘nuanced and flexible way and to feel personally confident in [my] practice rather than blindly following a recipe’ (Carter & Little, 2007:1324). In deciding which methods to employ congruence with the research questions and underpinning philosophical framework makes a phenomenological study ‘valid’ (Pereira, 2012:19). The phenomenological principles of hermeneutic circling and bracketing were important additions to my research and both are conducive to the ontological and epistemology of phenomenology. Both of these phenomenological principles accept there is no one way to approach qualitative data rather there are multiple ways to arrange, interpret and theorise.

I constructed vignettes to enable hermeneutic circling which enabled me to further engage with voice in a different but complementary way. The analysis of data was not a linear process because I looked at sections of texts and at whole texts, I looked within codes and across codes, I considered individual accounts for uniqueness and all accounts for common ground. The three stages of analysis evolved out of my wish to theorise and draw conclusions from hearing the voice of participants and at the same time recognise my potential influences. These influences came from my positionality of practitioner insider doctoral research student

and bracketing by clearly drawing attention to these served as a useful reflexivity tool. By recognising my preconceptions, knowledge and experiences as a practitioner I felt that I was endeavouring to produce credible and trustworthy research, and findings that the practice learning community would recognise and find value in. These are important to me as a practitioner researcher as I continue to practise within the setting of my research and have ongoing relationships with a number of the participants. It is also aligned to my social work values of honesty and integrity. I aimed to give the best possible account and strive to produce credible interpretation rather than risk individuals feeling that I have misrepresented their perspectives. I make no claims about truths nor do I propose that the conclusions I drew from my interpretations are the only way to construct meaning. However I found bracketing and reengaging with practice educators were important additions alongside my three stage IPA process (see illustration four) to give me confidence that I was endeavouring to produce credible and trustworthy research. In this article I share my three stage model to encourage others to consider how method can be drawn upon and adapted to meet the needs of their own research projects.

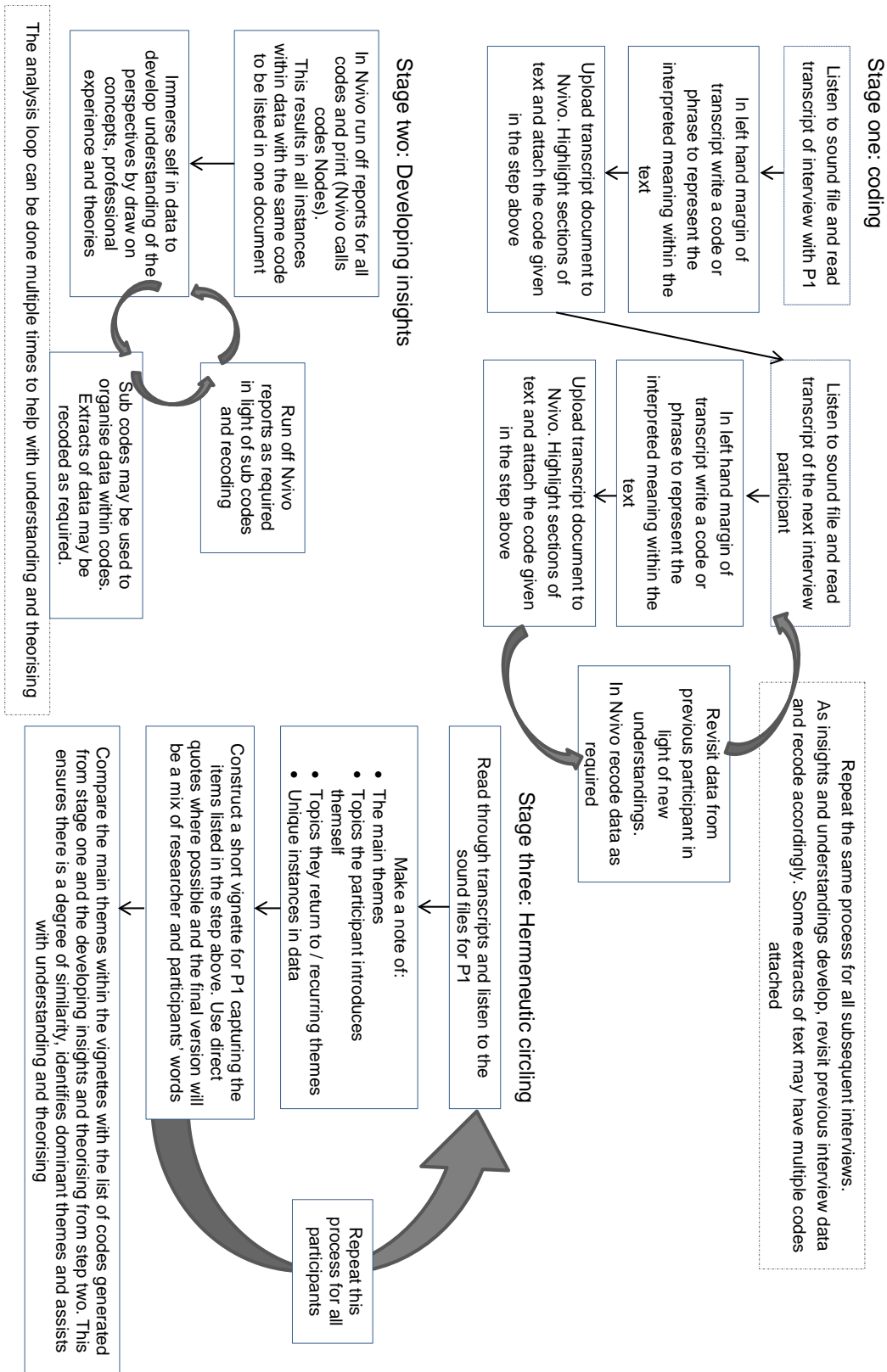


Figure 4: The three stages

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